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BY

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‘IN-BETWEEN’ DIFFERENT CULTURES:

the integration experiences
and future career expectations
of international degree
students studying in Finland

Introduction

Finnish education experienced a strong wave of internationalisation in the early 2000s. Higher education institutions in Finland (polytechnics, universities) are the most important educational level to have adopted internationalisation in their strategies. Indeed, internationalisation is seen to be at the heart of university strategies and it is appreciated as a valuable source of cultural capital (see Jones 2007). Consequently, it is embedded in the reform of research, innovation, and the higher education system in Finland, and strategic goals involving internationalisation have been included in the government programme and policy documents. This is connected to, among other things, attracting highly educated experts to Finland, preserving the country's international competitiveness, and meeting the labour deficit caused by the ageing population.

In spite of the strategic objectives, the situation of international students and international labour in Finland is by no means

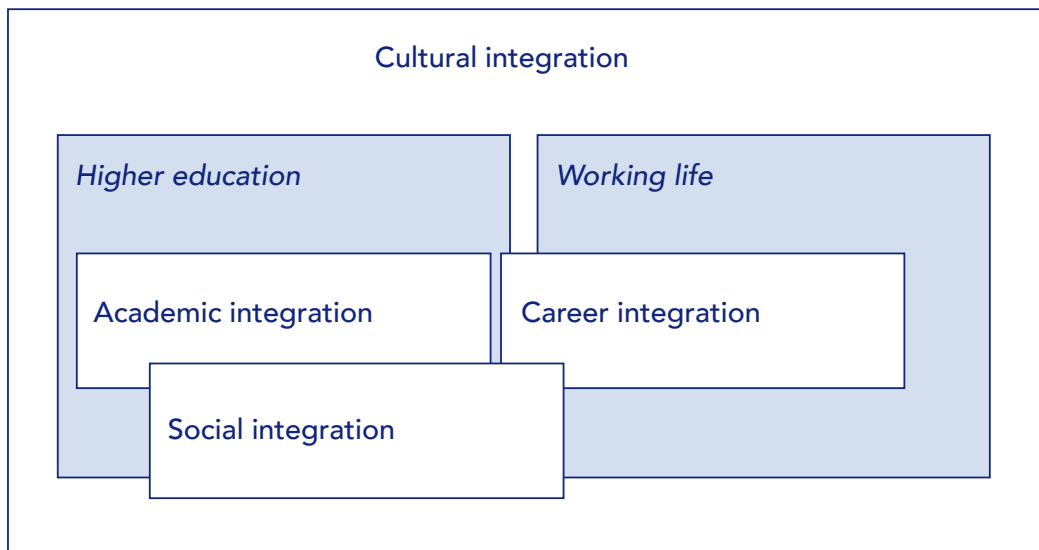
easy. Research on migrant experiences has shown that highly educated immigrants are a problematic group in terms of the labour market in Finland. Even advanced academic degrees do not necessarily guarantee immigrants jobs that corresponds to their education, regardless of whether the qualifications were obtained from the country of departure or Finland (see Forsander et al 2004; Wrede & Nordberg 2010). This so-called over qualification phenomenon has also been common in other European Union member countries for some time (Teichler & Kehm 1995). It affects marginal groups most strongly, such as individuals with an immigrant background.

From the perspective of international students' experiences, studying for a degree in a foreign society, culture, and community is a very demanding, long-term process that brings many kinds of challenges (e.g., Leung 2001; Bartram 2007). Exchange students usually stay for a few months, whereas the international degree students spend several years in the country in order to complete the whole degree. International students in higher education are examined very actively internationally. Research is particularly substantial in those countries where the numbers of the international students have been considerable, such as Great Britain, the United States, and Australia. The focus in Finnish higher education research has mainly been on the exchange students' experiences. Nevertheless, the international degree students' studies at Finnish universities and/or their integration into Finnish culture has been studied increasingly over the past decade (see, e.g., Ally 2002; Kinnunen 2003; Taajamo 2005; Niemelä 2008; Pietilä 2010; Lairio et al 2012; Korhonen 2013; Sakurai 2014.)

The main objective of this study is to examine 1) how international degree students studying at Finnish universities experience their integration into academic education, and 2) how they experience integration into Finnish society and the labour market during and after their studies.

Culture and integration: the dimensions of integration experiences and the perspective of 'in between' spaces

Adapting to a new culture is always a complex and dynamic process (Pietilä 2010). 'International student' as a term easily creates a homogenous image of foreign students, much like the term 'immigrant'. However, international students are a heterogeneous group of people from diverse cultural backgrounds (see Korhonen 2013). There are many different theories and concepts related to cultural integration and adaptation. Sue and Sue's (2008) cultural identity development model takes into account the different stages of cultural adaptation. In the stages of identity development, an immigrant's relationship with his/her own cultural and ethnic roots may vary in relation to the local dominant culture. At first, in the conformist stage, the attitude towards the dominant culture may be overwhelmingly positive and the immigrant values the dominant cultural values over his/her own. Gradually, during next stages of the adaptation process, a critical awareness of the dominant culture proceeds and the appreciation of the immigrant's own cultural roots is gradually restored. This may gradually lead to the integrative awareness stage, where the immigrant develops an internal sense of security and



— FIGURE 1. Aspects of international degree students' integration experiences. —

begins to have realistic and balanced perceptions regarding his/her own culture and the dominant culture. The immigrant may then experience solidarity towards both his/her own culture and the host country's culture. (Sue & Sue 2008, 242-257)

Multiculturalism or cultural integration theories are not necessarily applicable as such to describe the international degree student's integration experiences (Lairio et al 2013). Therefore in this case, an appropriate conceptual approach is developed. International degree students' experiences of integration into society, education, and employment are described using four different integration concepts (see Figure 1). These aspects of integration experiences are especially related to the sociocultural issues of the international students' adaptation process (Anderson et al 2009). The important concepts and levels used to examine integration (in the light of adaptation and the 'in between' point-of-view) in

this case are *cultural, academic, social, and career integration* in Finnish higher education and working life (Korhonen 2013).

Cultural integration is the most extensive of the integration experience areas, and it describes the general engagement with society, language, and culture as well as cultural adaptation and overcoming possible culture shock (Sue & Sue 2008; Pietilä 2010; Korhonen 2013). It covers, among other things, inclusiveness and experiences of a sense of belonging in participating in social practices (Wenger 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al 2014). Cultural integration as a concept thus describes the contacts and social networks that an international degree student has both in higher education and beyond.

Integration experiences related to higher education in particular can be divided into two major areas, namely academic and social integration, which have been used

in numerous retention and drop-out related studies (Tinto 1975; 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Academic integration involves issues connected to the academic teaching and learning environment, such as academic performance, personal development, enjoyment of the subject, and identification with academic norms and values (Deil-Amen 2011). In addition, the meaning and foundation of studies (already at the stage when applying to study in Finland) are associated with this. Social integration, on the other hand, includes one's social contacts and friendships and personal contacts with academics. Students engage better in their studies when they perceive intellectual and social congruence, or a normative fit between themselves and the values, social rules, and academic nature of the institution (Deil Amen 2011). Social and cultural integration may overlap social integration because social relationships and peer communities can act both within the university and beyond. Social relationships may also affect engagement in the labour market.

Career integration means, especially in this case, international students' conceptions about their expertise, future plans, possible employment and/or career in Finland (or elsewhere) after graduating (Cai 2012), the assessment of opportunities provided by the generalist degree, and reflections on and choices for the future (Korhonen 2013). Career integration reflects the international students' expectations of engagement in the Finnish labour market and their beliefs concerning how realistic an option it is for them to work in Finland.

Cultural encounters with students and teachers belonging to the majority population are important in the integration

experiences of international students. Therefore, Evanoff (2006) also adds the people of the dominant culture as a factor in cultural integration and adaptation. When immigrants adapt to the target culture, the people of the target culture also adapt themselves to the newcomers' presence. From this perspective, Pietilä (2010) outlines cultural integration as a dialogical communication; it is a development of intercultural sensitivity and a process of sociocultural learning. Thus, cultural integration becomes a two-way process between the dominant and minority cultures. From this perspective, the cultural integration of immigrants can be understood in terms of contact with the dominant population and society while maintaining the immigrant's own culture, as the merging two cultures, or as adopting a hybrid bi-cultural identity (see Snauwaert et al 2003.)

Intercultural encounters and adaptation experiences can be approached more widely from an 'in-between' perspective. Pratt (1992) uses the term 'contact zones' and Ogden and colleagues (2014) use the term 'meeting grounds' to refer the space where international students and host community members confront cultural and individual differences. Bhabha (2004; also Benson 2010) use the term "third space" when referring to the intercultural 'in-between' spaces where the possibilities of self and identity are explored. The space between cultures can offer positive opportunities for people of different cultural backgrounds to experience deeper integration that promotes new identity orientations, constructs new collaboration, and makes cultural and communal structures more transparent (Korhonen & Puukari 2013). However, the space between the cultures can produce negative

in-between experiences. The negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension for borderline existences (Bhabha 2004). The term 'in-between' in this context can be used for the international students' searching of their own agency in the encounters between two different cultural perspectives. My aim in this article is to examine more closely if being in the 'in between' position is creating a kind of 'opportunity trap' for international students in Finland. The opportunity trap (Brown 2006) as a concept refers to the decreasing value of the higher education degree in the labour market, which may be a consequence of educational expansion and other similar factors.

International comparative surveys of traditional graduate students show that many are ambivalent about their possible careers and future during the studies (Russo 2011). These results imply that doubts grow as students advance towards completing their degrees, and suggest that students experience many deficiencies in their career planning. However, there are some studies pointing out that international degree students might have more optimistic conceptions than domestic students about their expertise development and future employment possibilities (Harman 2003). Nevertheless, studies concerning Finnish working life and the employment of immigrants have pointed out the difficulties of gaining employment, especially in Finland. In spite of the development of official support structures, even highly educated immigrants may have difficulties in finding employment (see Forsander et al 2004; Wrede & Nordberg 2010). The level of immigrant unemployment in Finland is worryingly high.

Methodology

Research on international degree students has been carried out using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Using a combined research design methodology (see Gorard & Taylor 2004; Bryman 2006), I seek to discover the general characteristics and trends of international degree students' integration experiences and career expectations, while also extending the review to the students' own personal experiences and meanings.

The quantitative dataset used in this case was obtained from the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (the International Students in Finnish Universities 2007 survey). The sample size included 952 respondents from different universities in Finland. It was originally a survey designed and assembled by the Finnish Studying and Education Research Foundation (Otus) in 2007. The target group of international students was sought from university student registers. The final sample size was 2,441 subjects, of whom 952 participated (the response rate was 39%). The respondents were studying in Finland between 1999 and 2007. The survey data itself is a representative sample of international degree students in Finland and its content is well suited for use in this context, since the objective of using the survey data was to find out how international degree students experience academic learning and integration into Finnish society and what plans they hold for the future.

The qualitative interview data was collected in 2012 to provide a deeper insight into the personal experiences of a selected sample of international degree students at two Finnish universities (the Universities of Turku and Tampere). The interviewees

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(n=7) were doctoral students, Master's programme students, or international degree students in the final stages of their studies. They were recruited mainly by snowball sampling, where progress was made through the interviewer's or interviewees' personal contacts. The interviewed international degree students were from the fields of information sciences, educational sciences, and the social sciences. One of the interviewees was female and the rest were male. The aim was to reach interviewees coming from different continents and this succeeded very well. The interviewees were from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, so they represent the mixture of incoming international students in Finland. The themes were sent to interviewees in advance and they could choose if they preferred to respond to interview questions in Finnish or English.

The research questions focused on the following three main issues:

1. How do international degree students experience being integrated into Finnish society, and what kinds of supportive social relationships do they have inside and outside the university? (survey, interviews)
2. How do they experience academic and social integration in academic education and teaching and learning communities? (survey, interviews)

3. How do they consider their future career and employment prospects in the Finnish labour market? (survey, interviews)

The survey results have been previously reported in Niemelä's (2008) publication. Nevertheless, the data was reanalysed for this purpose using the most common quantitative research methods, such as descriptive statistical distributions and parameters, as well as cross-tabulations, statistical tests, and logistic regression analysis (Argyrous 1997; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). In particular, the logistic regression analysis results reveal interesting new connections in the data, such as what kind of factors are connected to not feeling socially and culturally excluded and the willingness to stay and work in Finland after graduation. Such results have not previously been reported from this data.

The analysis of the interview data followed the logic of both data-driven and directed content analysis (Miles & Huberman 1999). The analysis in this case started by inductively reading the data and finding emerging themes. However, when comparing and combining results with the survey findings, the analysis was done in the manner of directed content analysis. The chief aim was to identify the main themes in interviewees' speech that highlight different aspects of the integration experiences at university and beyond. In the first phase

Cultural integration + - Contradictory adaptation experiences	
Academic integration + Studying as intellectual growth	- Falling in-between
Social integration + Supporting social peer relationships	- Limitations in social activity
Career integration + Academic education as qualifier for a career + Many possibilities in work and careers	- Obstacles to career engagement

— **FIGURE 2. Themes of the integration experiences combined with the predefined experience dimensions** —

of the analysis, significant expressions were identified from the interview speech and these were grouped together on the basis of similarities and differences. This data-driven thematisation resulted in eight specific themes. Some of the themes represented positive experiences, some negative experiences, and one theme described contradictory experiences. The third phase of analysis was theory-driven and the previous themes were combined into four predefined experience dimensions (cultural, academic, social, career) either as positive or negative experiences (see Figure 2).

Results

Cultural and social integration beyond university

A key concern for cultural and social integration may be social discrimination or

exclusion due to immigrant background (Anderson et al 2009). In the quantitative survey, there was a specific question asking if the respondents felt excluded from university environments because they were foreigners. On the basis of the answers to this question, a sense of belonging is common for most international students, because nearly three out of four respondents (73.5%) reported that they did not feel excluded. Nevertheless, this means that about one in four may have experienced discrimination or exclusion. This is a relatively high proportion of respondents and the number should be lower.

With the help of logistic regression, an examination was done about the factors that possibly serve as the best and significant predictors for the feeling that one is not excluded (see Table 1). The effect of the individual explanatory variable appears in coefficient B in Table 1. The sign (plus or

Does not feel excluded for being a foreigner	B	Standard Error (S.E.)	Sig.	Exp. (B)
EU/EEA country	1.019	.441	.021	2.772
Other European country	1.589	.519	.002	4.897
Asia	1.043	.462	.024	2.837
Years lived in Finland	-.137	.040	.001	.872
Enough social contacts with other people: Yes	1.053	.206	.000	2.867
Overall Percentage: 76.2				

TABLE 1. Logistic regression of factors related to feelings of not being excluded from Finnish society.

minus) gives the reference to which direction the explanatory factor affects. The risk level [Exp(B)] in the final column of Table 1 represents how probable the individual factor predicts the respondent will belong to the 'not feeling excluded' group. The best predictors proved to be European or Asian background and having enough social contacts. Hence, these factors are more likely than other factors to predict the development of feelings of inclusion among international students as a part of their cultural integration. Correspondingly, the coefficient of the variable 'years lived in Finland' in the model is negative (Table 1), which indicates that a longer duration of stay in Finland may even increase the share of those respondents who feel excluded, although the addition of the share is very small on the basis of the coefficient. The overall classification percentage of the logistic model is 76.2. This implies a 76% chance that the respondent will belong to the group students who do not feel

excluded. However, the explanation rate is fairly low, between 8.4–12.3 percent; thus, the model is only indicative of the development of the feeling of not being excluded. The explanation rate tells how well the model found predicts the phenomenon.

Learning the domestic language also is considered one essential part of the cultural and social integration of immigrants, especially in non-English speaking countries (Pietilä 2010). The international degree students' Finnish language skills may be very minor when beginning their studies (Niemelä 2008), which makes their integration more difficult in all integration areas (academic, social, cultural, career). When beginning their studies in Finland, half of the respondents (56%) did not know Finnish at all, and every fourth respondent's language skill was at the beginner or lower intermediate level. Fortunately, the situation had improved by the time of the questionnaire, because for two out of five respondents,

their Finnish skills were at least at the intermediate level, and only 42 respondents (4%) reported that they still did not know any Finnish at all.

The interview data highlighted *the contradictory adaptation experiences* theme in the cultural integration context. This theme related to negative experiences of alienation, disappointment and conflicts, as well as individuality and the burden of responsibility in a foreign culture. Finnish culture was perhaps experienced as individualistic and emphasising autonomy, which at first caused value conflicts and issues regarding behaviour and practices. The experiences of strangeness seemed to be particularly prevalent when the student did not receive any response in human encounters despite his/her own efforts, or did not feel he/she belonged to any community.

When you are in the bus, people sit alone, one, one, one, one. They do not sit together. Do not talk to each other. I see this as one point of individualistic society. (H1)

This reflects the attitudes and values of the society. That is why students here should be so much independent, individualised. Should be more together, interact with other groups. (H3)

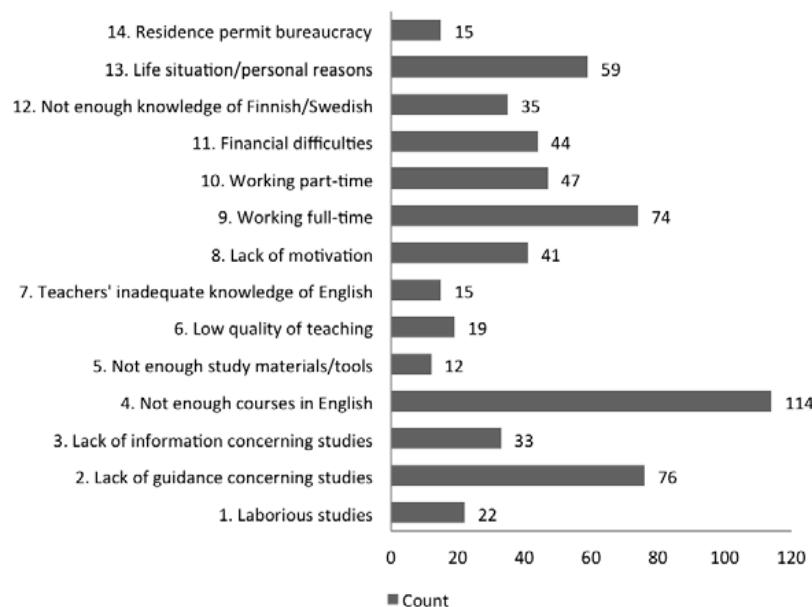
In addition, the positive aspects in the adaptation experiences became forth when the students felt their own cultural background was welcomed or their experiences were socially strengthening. By means of social support and encouragement – as well as by means of a positive reception within the mainstream culture – international students' experienced support in

studies and in life, and gained self-confidence in learning and everyday life events. Support could be provided by contacts with Finnish fellow students who help with difficult matters.

Academic and social integration in higher education studies

The survey respondents were asked for their view on the current level of Finnish education. The estimations given by the respondents were very positive: nearly nine out of ten considered the level of the Finnish education to be at least fairly good and just under a third considered it to be extremely good. In addition to general satisfaction and attitudes towards education, academic integration affects the performance and experiences of the international student's studies (see Trice & Yoo 2007; Rienties et al 2012). Seven out of ten respondents estimated that they were satisfied with the progress of their studies. This is a significantly better result than the domestic Finnish university students' general satisfaction with the progress of their studies on average (see EuroStudent III-IV).

Even though the clear majority of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the progress of studies, half of them noted that the studies had not proceeded in the way planned for at least one reason. When the reasons mentioned are looked at in more detail (Figure 3), the most commonly mentioned reason is "not enough courses available in English" (114 mentions). The second most mentioned reason is "lack of guidance concerning studies" (76 mentions), which again is related to academic education.



— FIGURE 3. Reasons mentioned for studies not progressing as planned —
(mentioned at least ten times or more).

In the interviews, both positive and negative integration experiences were recalled. In connection to academic integration, the interviews brought up the positive theme of *studying as intellectual growth*: the interviewees described the meaning of education as a symbolic value to their life and academic education as such capital that makes it possible to influence matters and people. The dimensions of growth and development as a human being were seen in the interviewees' opinion alongside the relevance of education and obtaining a degree.

The falling in-between theme was highlighted as a negative experience related to the academic integration: the students described studying as moving between

different marginal spaces in the academic community. In this case, the students did not experience engagement with anything. In these negative experiences, the distance of the scientific community from the student's world and the academic actors' clearly defined roles, and separation were emphasised.

You try to accommodate here but you find yourself alone. (...) Just feel that you are somewhere trying to belong, between different areas and groups. Now I just sit at home alone and try to work and study. (H1)

I think I am kind of like in-between these divisions, in this academic community. (H3)

» The interviews also highlighted the fact that among international students, social interaction is easily restricted only to the international students' joint events and meetings. »

The relations of the student to fellow students and staff form the central area of social integration in the university environment. In the interviews, the centrality of the *social agency* theme was emphasized as an affirmative and positive feature. In this connection, the international students described their own socially active role in the student community and emphasised the importance of social communication for success in their studies. In the positive social integration experiences, a desire to engage with other students – to network and interact – emerged.

I have friends, international students. (...) We meet in seminar groups and I get support from them. We also meet in different fields and occasions. (H2)

The interviews also highlighted the fact that among international students, social interaction is easily restricted only to the international students' joint events and meetings. This is encompassed by the *limitations in social activity* theme. Seeking peers of one's own nationality was not especially common. Instead, social activity was considered the most central matter for studying, irrespective of nationality. However, nearly all the social contacts have been restricted to social relations with other international students.

In some earlier studies, more negative social integration experiences seem to be connected more typically to large departments, traditional mass lectures, and complete degree programmes in Finland. Instead, the atmosphere inside the departments with smaller student numbers and self-contained Master's programmes are usually regarded as good. (Niemelä 2008) Contacts with Finns are sought more generally because they are considered important, for example, in strengthening integration in Finnish society and gaining skills in the Finnish language (Taajamo 2005; Niemelä 2008).

Integration into a career, and future career expectations

In the International Students in Finnish Universities survey, respondents were asked about their future plans to stay and work in Finland after graduation. The majority of the respondents were willing to stay in Finland, responding either that they would definitely stay or at least stay under certain conditions (65%). Approximately one in five respondents was definitely sure of staying in Finland after graduation. Correspondingly, approximately one in six (16%) was sure about leaving Finland. The future was still open for approximately one in five.

Plans after graduating: Stay in Finland	B	Standard Error (S.E.)	Sig.	Exp. (B)
I see myself as a member of Finnish society	.310	.084	.000	1.364
Importance of the following factors for the respondent's decision to take a degree in Finland: Plans to work in Finland	.696	.153	.000	2.006
Importance in the choice of university: Employment possibilities in Finland after studies	.698	.147	.000	2.009
Respondent's satisfaction with: Quality of teaching	-.332	.144	.021	.717
Respondent's satisfaction with: Course contents	.457	.153	.003	1.580
Overall Percentage 74.3 %				

TABLE 2. The factors predicting willingness to stay in Finland after graduating.

Work is seen a central factor that integrates immigrants into the host society, and thus the employment of international graduates is an essential question from the perspective of career integration. With the help of logistic regression, an analysis was further made about the factors that possibly serve as the best and significant predictors for the respondents' willingness to stay in Finland after graduation. The risk level [Exp (B)] represents how probable the individual factor predicts the respondent will belong to the 'stay in Finland' group (see Table 3). The best predictors for the willingness to stay in Finland (risk level greater than 2) proved to be intentions to work in Finland and/or the employment

possibilities in Finland as already estimated when choosing the university. These factors are more likely to predict the willingness of the respondent to stay in Finland after graduation. Similarly, estimates related to academic teaching are contradictory in the model (Table 2), although satisfaction with the course content seems to predict that the respondent is more likely the stay in Finland than satisfaction with the quality of teaching. The overall classification percentage of the logistic model is 74.3%, which describes the probability of a respondent belonging to the 'stay in Finland' group. The explanation rate is between 20.0–27.5%, thus the model is considered mainly indicative in this case too.

Even though highly-educated immigrants are usually in the best position in the labour market among all immigrants, international students' difficulties in gaining employment in Finland has repeatedly been emphasised in earlier studies (Ally 2002; Kinnunen 2003; Koivisto & Juusola 2008). The interviews highlighted both positive and negative themes concerning career integration and future career expectations. Thus, career expectations seem to be contradictory. The theme *academic education as qualifier for a career* was one of the positives connected to integration into a career. Even though the interviewees represented generalist fields, they emphasised that their studies had a clear focus on a career path, and acquiring formal competence influenced degree completion. Another positive in the interviews was the *many possibilities in work and careers* theme. The students had not clearly profiled any profession but rather had an open attitude to their future career. In this theme, it was emphasised that generalist degrees do not prepare students for a certain profession, but such degrees can open up opportunities for a wide variety of careers.

I am really quite open about work because you never know. (...) It is not always something you have thought of yourself, it could just come some other way, even if you haven't thought about it. (H7)

As a negative theme in connection with career integration, the theme of *obstacles in career engagement* was highlighted: language barriers and a lack of social networks were emphasised as obstacles. Furthermore, the pressure was caused in the interviewees' mind by the formal

proficiency requirements of the Finnish labour market. This was considered very demanding by the international students. The students may have regarded their own earlier education as inadequate according to the high Finnish proficiency requirements.

That paper is emphasized here really much. Also in the work there are competent people but if you are not valid formally, so it does not mean anything at all here in the society. (H4)

The international degree students' conceptions of career integration are uniform from the points of view of both the survey findings and the interview results.

Conclusions

The results of this study show that if one wants to understand international degree students' integration experiences more comprehensively, attention must be paid to all aspects of integration: namely cultural, social, academic, and career integration. The position of international students seems to lie between cultures (between the old and new or between us and others). Research on the integration and adaptation of international students should widen its focus to the underlying mechanisms that may lead to weak integration and negative experiences in this in-between position (see Rienties et al 2011). Academic integration cannot be entirely understood if, at the same time, the significance of cultural and social integration and the adaptation stages related to cultural integration are not identified (see Sue & Sue 2008). The in-between position in studies easily leads to marginalisation in the competitive

arenas of careers and employment after graduation, and these arenas represent one of the biggest challenges facing international degree students when they form their plans and expectations for the future.

The mixed method data shows that in the different areas of the international students' integration experiences there were either strengthening or weakening factors. According to the findings, the factors strengthening integration with other areas of integration can help overcome a more difficult situation in one particular area of integration. In particular, the impact of the higher education context should be highlighted. For example, Sakurai (2014) found that international students in Finland may not take advantage of peer support and collaborative learning opportunities in the best possible manner. The academic and social integration challenges found – like the themes of *falling in-between* and *limitations in social activity* – already require attention during higher education. The in-between position in career integration does not result solely from the fairly closed labour market. According to the students' views, the language barriers and lack of social networks significantly impede successful employment in Finland. Hence, if other areas of international students' integration were improved, such as cultural, social, and academic integration in higher education and beyond, it would improve the international students' opportunities to find employment in the Finnish labour market.

The expansion of international programmes and getting stuck in the 'in-between' position seem to produce a growing opportunity trap for international degree students. Research literature from different countries shows that the actions of higher

education institutions can improve cultural diversity and the position of minority groups already during studies (Harper & Quaye 2009; Severiens & Wolf 2009; Cai 2012). The integration of international students as a whole could be improved by creating sustainable structures for understanding diversity, the development of multicultural competencies of higher education staff, developing collaboration between the education institutes and the world of work in international study programs, and increasing international students' participation and opportunities have an influence. It is important to provide opportunities for international students to create contacts with domestic students, local people, and representatives of the world of work. It would also be beneficial to organise events where international students can share their experiences of their own country and culture. Expanding students' social networks within the university and beyond should be an essential part of international students' counselling to support meaningful integration experiences (Arthur 2013). The benefits for the students would be improved performance in studies, the development of intellectuality and expertise, and possibly better integration into post-degree careers and the labour market of the destination country.

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